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ABSTRACT

Native American education did not begin with European-style schools; it began at home with traditional storytelling. Traditional stories aimed to share wisdom, not to force it. Children can only understand certain things when they are mature enough to do so. Each time a story was told, the listener could learn new morals and life instructions. Because they were always being educated, Native people were true lifetime learners. American Indian elders play an important role in a child's education because of their life's wisdom. Native American storytellers hold an important position because of their oratorical skills and their ability to convey cultural knowledge in a way that can be easily assimilated and remembered. Storytelling is remarkably effective. Unlike some contemporary classroom education, storytelling engages youngsters so much that they look forward to hearing and learning their lessons. Stories contained many lessons about tribal culture--they taught important taboos and social mores and taught listeners how proper people acted under circumstances both adverse and advantageous. Important social rules, life lessons, ceremonial knowledge, and historical events are included in stories. Stories have powerful potential as social control for children. They were used to reinforce and explain positive behavior and to punish negative behavior. Traditional stories are an important source of tribal common law and are used and cited in Navajo courts. (Contains 32 references) (TD)

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OUR "FIRST EDUCATION"

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Our "First Education"

It should not surprise any seasoned story lover that the infamous Sioux trickster Iktomi was still hungry even after capturing a bagful of fat ducks, because he had foolishly led his enemies to every tasty morsel which they promptly ate while he had while he remained trapped in a tree (Zitkala-Ša, 1901:18-19). It should surprise them, however, that Iktomi freely offered his only blanket to the stone god Inyan after praying for food lest he starve. This type of admirable behavior is seldom seen in Iktomi. Towards the end of the story, however, well after Iktomi has encountered the deer that Inyan generously provided to soothe his ardent prayers, the listener learns that Iktomi reconsiders his offering when he becomes cold that evening:

> Iktomi, in the warm sunshine, had no need of his blanket, and it had been very easy to part with a thing which he could not miss. But the chilly night wind quite froze his ardent thank-offering…Seizing one corner of the half-worn blanket, Iktomi pulled it off with a jerk. "Give my blanket back, old grandfather! You do not need it. I do!" This was very wrong, yet Iktomi did it, for his wit was not wisdom (Zitkala-Ša, 1901:22).

Once again, it appears that Iktomi has acted in his predictably crass, unprincipled manner. As is typical, Iktomi is punished for

his culturally criminal behavior; when he returns to cook the deer Inyan had provided for him, he finds that it has mysteriously disappeared. Rather than learn from his mistakes, however, Iktomi continues to think only of himself:

> ...instead of being grieved that he had taken back his blanket, he cried aloud, "Hin-hin-hin! If only I had eaten the venison before going for my blanket!" Those tears no longer moved the hand of the Generous Giver. They were selfish tears. The Great Spirit does not heed them ever (p. 23).

Variants of this story, "Iktomi's Blanket," have been told to Sioux children for generations, by their grandparents and other sage storytellers. That the story has survived for so many years and is still a Sioux favorite shows that even contemporary Native Americans value the "traditional path." Our grandparents are closer to the traditional path than our parents, and they were taught by their grandparents and so on, spiraling back to the beginning of The People. Our elders believe that their children (meaning all the children- not just those related by bloodline) are the bridge to the future, while they themselves are the bridge to the past. And, the elders have always been concerned how children learn what they are told and how they then express that knowledge (Johanna,

1993:19). Hence, the importance of stories in Native American culture.

Looking back in time to this 'first education,' Native American children cherished stories like "Iktomi's Blanket" which were gently given to them by their elders, treasured gifts containing much more than mere entertainment. The 'first education' was done the Indian way; the idea was to share the wisdom rather than force it. Each child heard the message as it was lovingly shared, so s/he could grasp the message when it made sense to do so (i.e., children can only understand certain meanings included in traditional teachings when they are mature enough to do so). Each time a story was told, the listener could learn new morals and life instructions. Children were told that "thinking is sacred" and "listening is sacred" after they were assured that they were loved, wanted, safe, and would be cared for. Stories, then, were a family- oriented method of teaching.

Native American education did not begin with the European-style schools brought by Euroamericans; it began at home with traditional storytelling. Stories both delighted and taught children of many ages. Because they were always being educated, Native people were true lifetime learners who never left

the learning mode. The learning way (being open to knowledge) was in every cell of their being. Each new story or teaching was received as a joy and children were eager to gain more teachings.

Indian education builds upon itself. What was knowledge for the earlier generations can be adjusted to fit present situations. Without our ancestors' knowledge as a solid base, we are not building, but instead just laying down a new base each generation. Knowledge gained by our predecessors adds to the depth of our own understanding of what The One Who Dwells Above knows is right for the good of all creations, which we know to include much more than just humans. First Man and First Woman were taught by all that The One Who Dwells Above has created. Messages came to them from plants, rocks, the soil, stars, lightening, animals, insects, and more. With this divine input it is understandable that there are Cherokees who believe that the teachings, the listening, the art of storytelling, the lessons—are in each cell of our body.

Among the Cherokee, for example, storytelling and other forms of education begin before birth. Both the father and mother-to-be sing and talk to the unborn child. After the baby's birth, everyone who comes into contact with the child is considered to be

a teacher as are all the nations (i.e., animal, rock, water beings, birds, insects, plants, etc.) that surround the small human.

From the Cherokee perspective, "children are raised to know the traditional meaning of family, clan, tribe, and a sense of spirituality emphasizing harmony and balance through 'relationship'" (Garrett, 1996:12). American Indian elders played an important role in a child's 'informal' education because they were an important part of the tribal community. They were parents, teachers, community leaders, and spiritual guides. They were honored and highly respected because of their life's wisdom. This was why the elders were known as the "Keepers of the Wisdom." Through the oral tradition, this wisdom "guides one's interactions and way of life through a learning process of observation and listening, supervised participation and self-testing" (Garrett, 1996:12). By watching and listening to their elders, then, the children learned the things it was important for them to know.

Looking to the Dakota people we find that the oral tradition stories were passed down from grandmother to granddaughter and were much more than a simple educational process. These stories of history, myths and legends "were rooted in a deep sense of kinship responsibility, a responsibility that relays a culture, an

identity, and a sense of belonging." Dakotas considered this to be essential to their lives. It taught what it meant to be a Dakota woman and the privileges, responsibilities, along with the pride and pain of this identity (Wilson, 1996:7).

The Dakota oral tradition began early in a child's life with everyone agreeing that the child would assume the task of preserving and transmitting the important tribal narratives. Being an acquired skill, children first listened while a story was told by their parents or grandparents. On the following evening, the children were asked to repeat the story to the household. By listening and retelling stories, traditional children gained an understanding of where they came from, who they were, and what was expected of them (Wilson, 1996:7).

Storytellers as culturally appropriate teachers

While nearly anyone can relate stories, few can achieve the revered status of master storyteller that puts one in demand at family and tribal events. Native American storytellers were (and still are) valued for their oratorical skills and their abilities to teach through words and gestures. Nez Perce storyteller Ron Pinkham's grandfather taught him to speak well. Now Ron Pinkham is

considered one of his tribe's great treasures due to his oratorical skill (Denver Powwow Video, 1998). Storytellers still hold an important position. Those who come to gatherings to "tell stories" hold vast cultural knowledge and must possess a special expertise to convey that knowledge in a way that can be easily assimilated and remembered. Ethnographer Frank Linderman spoke of the three essential storytelling qualifications that Crow mother Pretty Shield possessed: "age that permits her to have know the natural life of her people..., keen mentality, and above all the willingness to talk" (Linderman, 1932).

As a teaching tool, storytelling is remarkable effective. Unlike contemporary classroom education, which turns off some children, storytelling engages youngsters so much that they literally look forward to hearing and learning their lessons (e.g., Bierhorst, 1985:117; Bryant, 1905/1996:9; Lame Deer and Erdoes, 1972:20-21; McLaughlin, 1916:5). For example, Sioux trickster Iktomi's (also spelled Iktome, Unktomi, or Inktomi) comical and yet culturally complex exploits make for great storytelling. Children of all ages delight in hearing Iktomi stories, which contain multiple layers of traditional teachings. Zitkala-Ša

(1921/1993:212), best known for her compendiums of Sioux legends, described her childhood love of Iktomi stories:

> I patiently [listened to the elders talking around the community campfire]...wishing all the time that they would begin the stories I loved best. At last, when I could not wait any longer, I whispered in my mother's ear, "Ask them to tell an Iktomi story, mother." Soothing my impatience, my mother said aloud, "My little daughter is anxious to hear your legends."

Those very same stories that captivated Zitkala-Ša and her young counterparts contained many lessons about her tribe's culture and their way of acting under various circumstances. As demonstrated by the text of "Iktomi's Blanket," for example, Iktomi stories presented a host of messages about how one should (and should not) behave. According to several scholars, trickster stories like those that documented Iktomi's interesting exploits also taught important taboos and social mores and taught listeners how proper people acted under circumstances both adverse and advantageous (e.g., Bierhorst 1985; Monaghan 1994:A8). Consider the multiple messages about appropriate behavior that are contained in the following introduction to one Iktomi story:

> Iktomi...wears brown deerskin leggins with long soft fringes on either side, and tiny beaded moccasins on his feet. His long black hair is parted in the middle and wrapped with red, red bands.

> Each round braid hangs over a small brown ear and falls forward over his shoulders.
>
> He even paints his funny face with red and yellow, and draws big black rings around his eyes. He wears a deerskin jacket, with bright colored beads sewed tightly on it. Iktomi dresses like a real Dakota brave. In truth, his paint and deerskins are the best part of him—if ever dress is part of man…
>
> Poor Iktomi…cannot find a single friend. No one helps him when he is in trouble. No one really loves him. Those who come to admire his handsome beaded jacket and long fringed leggins soon go away sick and tired of his vain, vain words and heartless laughter (Zitkala-Ša, 1901:1-3).

Stories were also a convenient vehicle for teaching important social relationships and beliefs to Native children. For children to develop an understanding and sensitivity for all relationships that coexist, elders were their guides. Guiding a child was looked upon as a sacred responsibility or blessing because elders are the major elements in the shaping of a child as a whole human being (in body and spirit). With the wise guidance and love given whole-heartily by a child's elders, a child knows of the balance and harmony in all things (Garrett, 1996:12). Traditional stories played a "socially important" (Schultz & Lavenda, 1995:196) role in the guidance given by elders to the younger generations. The recounting of stories has allowed Native Americans over time to feel a connection to their past, be it human ancestors or totemic creatures,

or belonging to a special interest group (e.g., a specific tribe, religion, political or a geographical location, or an event such as an individual's vision quest or a collective experience such as the forced Cherokee march on the Trail of Tears).

And, people's tribal identity is strengthened each time they hear the stories. The repetition reinforces the messages that are passed down from one generation to another. "Such a myth, insofar, as it is believed, accepted, and perpetuated in a culture, may be said to express a part of the worldview of a people, the unexpressed but implicit conceptions of their place in nature and of the limits and workings of their world" (Haviland, 1996:394). And, sacred historical stories serve as justifications for particular institutions in a society by linking the current life meanings with a sacred past and which conditioned behaviors were to bring desired results (Howard, 1993:306).

Important social rules and life lessons were included in stories or revealed in the tradition of storytelling. Many Native Americans, for example, were taught through stories to only take what they needed and to be sure to leave female animals undisturbed so they could give birth and replenish their populations and humans would then have future meals. Even

modern Navajos prefer to consume male sheep because within each female is "as many sheep as there are stars in the sky." Stories from several tribal nations recount what happened to peoples who were not respectful of tribal regulations for gathering game. Among the Tahltan Indians, failing to show respect for animals or breaking cultural taboos meant that *Atsentmá* (meat mother, who had given birth to all animals) would hide the game leading to human starvation (e.g., Bierhorst, 1985:63). Similarly, Northwest Coastal myths taught listeners the importance of returning Salmon bones to the river to ensure the continuation of the species; one Tlingit man notes that this policy encourages conservation because "If you knew you had to return every bone and every eye, you would think twice before taking more than you really needed" (Bierhorst, 1985:48-49). Even ceremonial knowledge (e.g., the importance of the Navajo *N'daa*, or Enemyway, ceremony and how one should conduct oneself at such a ceremony), were given through stories told to young Navajos during cold winter nights (e.g., Twenty-two Navajo Men and Women, 1977:78). Cultural knowledge was often dispensed to eager listeners several stories at a time.

Sometimes, it was more direct knowledge that was imparted through stories. Witthoft (1977:250, 254), for example, discusses the value of "potherbs" to the eastern Cherokees. These wild salad-like plants were a mainstay in the Cherokee diet, but their importance increased in times of poverty when the Cherokee used potherbs until staple corps were ready to be harvested. Through stories, young Cherokees were told about the importance of potherbs, where to find them, what part of the plants to pick (and what not to pick). Stories about hungry tribesmen who depended on potherbs in time of need likely made the lessons all the more palatable and easy to remember.

Historical stories, such as those told about the Navajo Long Walk or the Cherokee Trail of Tears provide important knowledge about one's heritage to the listener. Sometimes happy, sometimes sad, these stories document the progression and adaptation over time of Native peoples. The sacred Navajo journey narratives detail the lives of the Holy People, birth of humankind, ceremonial slaying by the Holy Twins of the monsters that plagued the earth, and other important concepts which still play a large role in Navajo life. At traditional Navajo weddings, historical stories about the role of men and women are told to the couple in hopes that the

stories will help them live in harmony. Sometimes historical stories are the only way Native children know anything about their roots, catching glimpses and reflections of themselves as the stories unfold.

Stories also served to present taboos to the listeners, such as the common tribal taboo of looking into anyone's eyes as doing so is considered rude. For many Native peoples, the eyes are considered the windows to the soul. This custom has been noted by non-Indian observers: "they seldom turn their eyes on the person they speak of, or address themselves to, and are always suspicious when people's eyes are fixed on them" (Woodward, 1963:38). According to many elders, overtly looking into the eyes of another is regarded as a negative form of control. In fact, some tribal traditions teach that those who look directly into another's eyes might be trying to "witch" the other person. Stories documenting the downfall of those who allowed others to gaze into their eyes served as dynamic deterrents to perpetuating or allowing such behavior to take place.

Stories as social control

As is probably clear from the above text, stories also have powerful potential as social control for children and others. One common use with children is to present stories as a way to elicit proper behavior from children. Noisy Tlingit children were sometimes told to be quite lest Owl would hear them and take them away (de Laguna, 1972:511). Navajo children who preferred to spend their days swimming in watering holes rather than being attentive to their sheep herds were sometimes told about water salamanders that lived in the muddy bottom of the reservoirs and "would come up from the bottom and go inside them through the places in the middle where they could go" (Anonymous, 1984:44). Hawaiian children are sometimes told they cannot go outside at night because bad spirits fall on and harm those who walk under trees; when the children returned, those spirits would then be brought into the home where they could harm the entire family and its possessions. Sioux children who pouted found themselves told that their faces would be frozen into a permanent pout if they did not immediately cease their behavior.

In addition to their teaching role, stories serve as effective discipline. In the olden days terribly misbehaved Cherokee

children were sometimes scratched lightly with thorns or corporally punished in other ways, but the most common discipline was to tease or shame children into proper behavior (Perdue, 1989:16-17). One way to shame children was by comparing them to poorly behaved characters in stories they knew. One young man who refused to share his candy, for example, was told by his friends that he was "pretty greedy, just like that [cursed] Coyote," referring to another common trickster who no respectable Native American would like to emulate (Meyer and Bogdan, 1999:26). Through such vivid comparisons, children could be immediately be shown that their activities were undesirable. Through use of stories, corporal punishment of children could be avoided, while effectively transforming behavior. When asked if she had ever "whipped" her children, for example, Crow mother Pretty Shield replied, "...my people never did such things. We talked to our children, told them things they needed to know, but we never struck a child, never" (Linderman, 1932).

Sometimes stories were used to reinforce and explain positive behavior rather than to "punish" negative behavior. As a young girl, for example, one of the authors of this report (Bogdan, 2000:42) learned the importance that Native Americans assign to

caring for the elderly, even those who are not pleasant. Because she could "walk like a cat," she was chosen by her family to deliver food to one particular elder's doorstep before rapidly retreating back into anonymity. Unfortunately, the recipient was a bitter old woman who often berated and belittled those around her, leading the girl to announce to her grandparents that she would not deliver food in the future due to the woman's abuse. What a mistake that was! The girl's grandmother looked at her and informed her that she would certainly be taking the food over every night because the old woman was an elder who could not care for herself, and to refuse to deliver food to the elder was to question the wisdom of The One Who Dwells Above who demonstrated her value to society by continuing to bless her with breath. As time passed, the girl mellowed and saw the value in being a proper person and not stooping to the level of behavior that elder had done when she cursed those around her. When the girl's grandparents felt she had matured enough to understand what they had taught her about the importance and the honor that went with feeding the elder, another food courier was appointed from within the family.

Stories are also effective in preventing (as opposed to terminating) unwanted behavior. Among the Navajo, incest is considered to be one of the two most serious violation of social norms (the other being witchcraft). One story recounted to a researcher in 1937 informed the listener about the death "years ago" of a girl who unwittingly had shared a bed with a member of her own clan because she was not careful in selecting her mates (van Valkenburgh, 1937:54). When her mother told her she would go crazy from engaging in such taboo behavior, the girl jumped off the high canyon walls surrounding her home. This story achieves two twin goals; it both documents the taboo and the negative consequences of breaking that taboo.

One of the most important usages of stories from a sovereignty standpoint is that traditional stories contain Native knowledge of their individual pasts and common laws. The Navajo Nation, for example, has an ongoing project that involves the collection from tribal medicine elders of traditional journey narratives. These sacred stories are then analyzed to shed light on how Navajos viewed and dealt with deviance in pre-contact days because such narratives are one important source of Navajo common law (Austin, 1992:6). In fact, the recounting of a story

about a traditional divorce in the 1800s and the century-old decision by an elder that the former wife had no claim to her dead ex-husband's cornfield was cited and given weight in a 1982 case in which a woman sought to claim her ex-husband's life insurance policy because she had been named as beneficiary (*Apachee vs. Republic National Life Insurance*, 1982; Rustywire, 1999). This case was important because the Navajo Supreme Court ruled that customary law has a valid place in the courts; the case also showed that Navajo common law was not simply remade Anglo-Saxon common law because the ruling would have differed under Anglo-Saxon concepts of contracts (Lowery, 1993:392).

Traditional Navajo legal practices are used regularly in the tribal Peacemaking Court. This legal forum for disputes gains its authority from traditional stories, but sometimes involves the telling of stories as well. While assisting the disputing parties to solve their problems, the peacemaker who runs the sessions may provide traditional teachings or tell stories (e.g., Meyer, 1998; Williams, 1970:6; Yazzie & Zion, 1996:167). In the event of a land dispute, for example, the traditional story about a dispute between Lightning and Horned Toad over land might be shared with the disputants to show them why their behavior is inappropriate;

Horned Toad shielded himself with his protective armor after Lighting tried to use lightning bolts to scare him off some land that Lightning felt was his (Bluehouse & Zion, 1993:333):

> ...The bolt bounced off Horned Toad's armor. "Brother, you did not hurt me," he said. "This armor was given to me by the same source as your bolts of lightning. Why is it we are arguing over the land, which was also loaned to us?

The importance of stories as a form of social control is illustrated by the fact that many Navajo judges argue that children should learn traditional coyote stories "because they are the law" (Yazzie & Zion, 1996:163). This belief is not limited to judges as other Navajos also feel the stories should be revitalized (Zion, 1991:159). That laws and social mores can be taught through careful use of stories is illustrative of the power of stories.

In order to honor our history modern storytellers are charged with the duty to share who we Native Americans were and how we lived successfully. Through this important function, storytellers and chroniclers can help preserve our varied cultures and life-ways. Their stories should include those told in the past as we humans face the same trials and tribulations in each generation. Without careful use of storytelling, it is obvious that many tribal cultures would be unable to successfully continue. Whenever we

can, we as scholars should share our traditional stories with the young and the not-so-young around us. Through storytelling, we can ensure the survival of cultural practices and beliefs, norms and law-ways, traditions and technology.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Barriers to High School Completion among At-Risk African-American Students: Implications For Social Work Practice
Kimberly Rene Adams ..... 1 ✓ - UD

Argentina's Policy Toward the United States During the Democratic Period (1983-2000)
Waldemar Arroyo-Rojas 37

No Fatherless Children: A Review of Four Father Enrichment Programs
Yolanda Bogan and Tomica Archie ..... 65 ✓ - UD

Multicultural Families in the United States: What Schoolteachers Don't Know is Hurting Our Children
C. Anne Broussard and Heath Miller ..... 89 ✓ - SP

Acculturation, Skin Color and Discrimination among Jamaican Immigrants in the United States
Steve A. Buddington ..... 111 ✓ - UD

Multicultural Aspects in Batterer Intervention Programs
Robert D. Hanser ..... 131 ✓ - UD

Environmental Justice in Urban Mississippi: The Location of Municipal Solid Waste Landfills and Toxic Release Inventory (TRI) Facilities
Olurominiyi Ibitayo 157

Rapid Rural Appraisal: A Case Study In Rural Mexico
David M. Lucas and Charles W. Jarrett ..... 181 ✓ - RC

Our "First Education"
Jon'a F. Meyer and Gloria Bogdan ..... 205 ✓ - RC

Exploring the Physical and Mental Health Condition of Female Inmates at Admission to Prison
Janet L. Mullings 229

Human Rights and Freedom of the Media in Africa's British Commonwealth Countries: A Necessity for Africa's Democratic Process
Alex Mwakikoti 267

CyberChômin@ Tôwa-chô: An Ethnography of Cyber Residents in a Japanese Rural Township
Christopher S. Thompson 293

Cultural Comparison of Bereavement Practices
Andrea C. Walker 321

Reparations: A Financial Not Moral Obligation Owed to Descendants of African Slaves Living in the United States
Stephen Earl White 351

Perceived Racism as a Source of Psychosocial and Physiological Stress in African Americans
Calvin Woodland, Carla Washington, and Anthony Hill 375

China's Changing Policies on the Drug-related Crimes
Hongwei Zhang 405

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